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## Church facade, religious symbol or exercise in masonry? : The case of a relief from Ptolemais

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ELŻBIETA JASTRZĘBOWSKA

### CHURCH FAÇADE, RELIGIOUS SYMBOL OR EXERCISE IN MASONRY? THE CASE OF A RELIEF FROM PTOLEMAIS

The block of limestone with a carved image of three crosses within an arcade of the “triphorium” type (Fig. 1), found in the previous century in Ptolemais, is neither a superb sculpture nor a part of a particularly interesting building among architectural complexes unearthed

within the area of this famous antique city in Cyrenaica. This cuboidal block still lies in the ruins of a Roman dwelling house in Ptolemais, in the so-called House of the Triapsidal Hall, or House T (Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the large and luxurious House T with a central peristyle covers



Fig. 1. The block of limestone from House T in Ptolemais (Photo E. Jastrzębowska).

Ryc. 1. Blok wapienia z Domu T w Ptolemais.

<sup>1</sup>J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, ed. J. Reynolds, London 2003, 194, figs. 148, 197; E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *The Cross Motif on Stone Objects from Ptolemais in Cyrenaica*, “Archeologia” (Warsaw) LVIII (2007), 2009, 99, pl. XIII:4; eadem, *Le basiliche cristiane sconosciute nel centro città di Tolemaide*, (in:) E. Jastrzębowska, M. Niewójt (eds.), *Archeologia a Tolemaide. Giornate di studio in occasione del*

*primo anniversario della morte di Tomasz Mikocki, Roma 27–28.05.2008*, Roma 2009, 236, fig. 11; eadem, *Graffito with “Triphorium” from Ptolemais*, “Kačič” XLI–XLIII (2009–2011), 2011 (*Miscellanea Emilio Marin Sexagenario Dicata*), 627–636; as far as this publication is concerned, I have introduced significant changes in the conclusion of the present text (see p. 27).

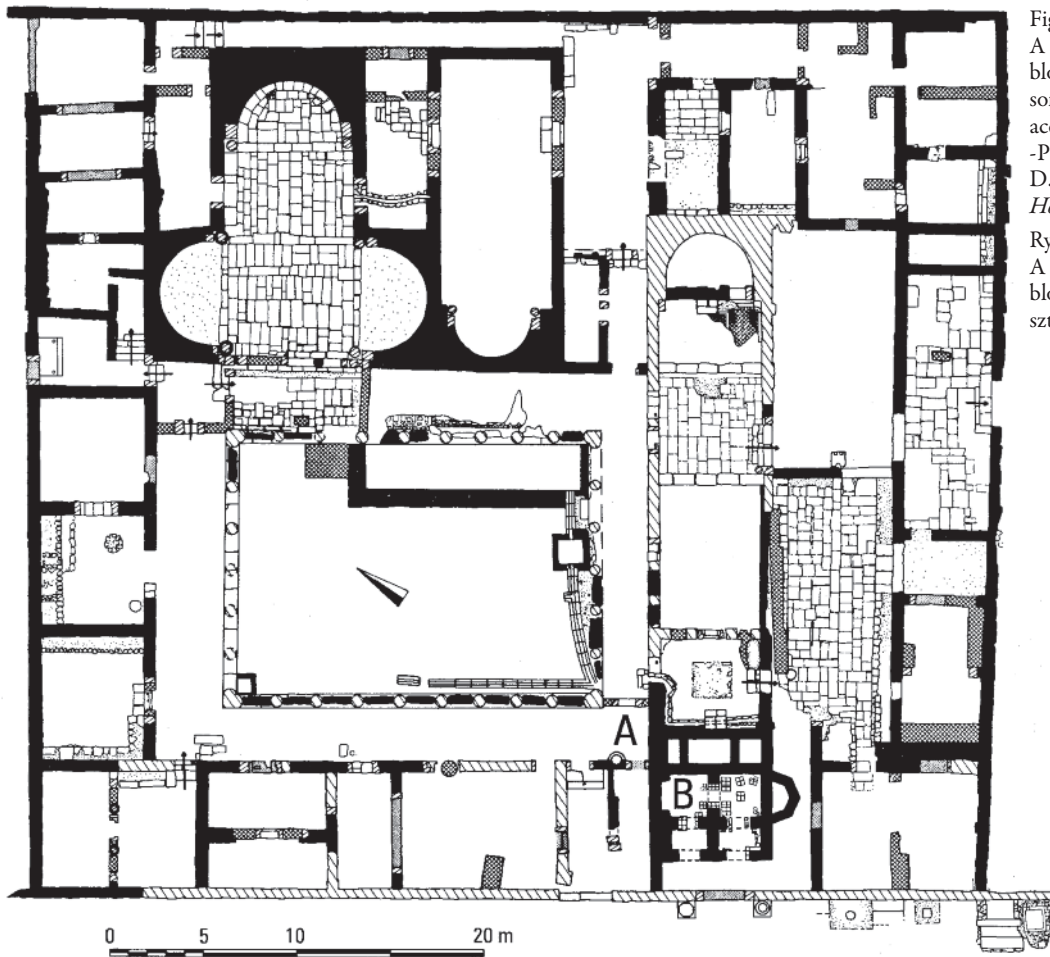


Fig. 2. Plan of House T: A – present location of the block with a relief; B – masonry workshop (Drawing according to J.B. WARD-PERKINS, J.H. LITTLE, D.J. MATTINGLY, *Town Houses...*, fig. 15).

Ryc. 2. Plan Domu T: A – aktualne położenie bloku z reliefem; B – warsztat kamieniarski.

a considerable area east of one of the *cardines* and north of one of the most important *decumani* of the Late Antique city, i.e. *Via Monumentalis*.<sup>2</sup>

Only five years ago, in House T, there were two limestone blocks ornamented with cross signs. They were documented by British archaeologists in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Besides, on the stone threshold at the entrance to the house, on the side of the street, there is also a graffito with a cross inscribed in a circle, albeit much cruder. As it was placed on a permanent element of the house, only this graffito can be considered to belong to this building beyond

doubt.<sup>4</sup> As far as the two other loose blocks are concerned, today no one knows any more when and where exactly they were found and in what archaeological context they were at the moment of the discovery, let alone how their ornamentation can be dated. The smaller, almost cubic block – with a relief in the form of a Maltese cross inscribed in a circle – was still visible in the ruins of the house in 2006, but in 2008 it was not there any longer.<sup>5</sup>

It is not possible to determine exactly the chronology of House T, where several phases of usage were distinguished: from the Early and Late Empire to the Byzantine

<sup>2</sup> C.H. KRAELING, *Ptolemais, City of the Libyan Pentapolis*, Chicago 1962, 81–83; S. STUCCHI, *Architettura Cirenaica*, Monografie di Archeologia Libica IX, Roma 1975, 446–447; P. PENSABENE, *Tradizioni orientali nel Tetrastilo a Tolemaide*, (in:) E. Jastrzębowska, M. Niewójt (eds.), *Archeologia a Tolemaide...*, 187–201.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, J. H. LITTLE, D. J. MATTINGLY, *Town Houses*

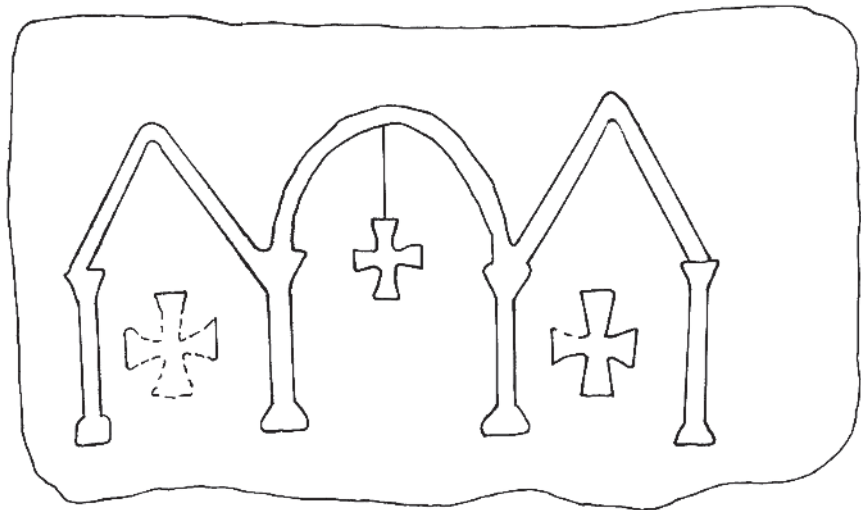
*at Ptolemais, Cyrenaica: Summary of Survey and Excavation Work in 1971, 1978–1979*, “Libyan Studies” 17, 1986, 126–143.

<sup>4</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments...*, fig. 149; E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *The Cross...*, 99, pl. XIV:1.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments...*, fig. 150 (as a round block?); E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *The Cross Motif...*, 99, pl. XIII:5,6; eadem, *Le basiliche...*, 237, fig. 12.

Fig. 3. The relief on the block from Ptolemais (Drawing E. Jastrzębowska).

Ryc. 3. Relief na bloku z Ptolemais.



Period.<sup>6</sup> All that is known is that this luxury urban residence from the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD was destroyed by an earthquake in 365, famous throughout Cyrenaica, after which it was rebuilt and underwent a large-scale reorganisation.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it seems that it was when Ptolemais became the capital of the province, after Cyrene had been completely demolished, that the new flourishing centre of the new capital developed in the north-eastern district of the city. Then were built the abovementioned *Via Monumentalis*, its intersection with a tetrastyle and all adjacent buildings, including Paulos's House, the so-called Byzantine Thermae and, farther to the east, the so-called Governor's Palace, and to the northeast, the rebuilt House T as well.

As for the bigger stone block, it was first recorded by Susan Alix already in 1969, and then, in the 1990s, its presence in House T was confirmed by other British researchers visiting Ptolemais.<sup>8</sup> The block made of local, quite weathered limestone has dimensions of ca. 80×40×40 cm and lies in the south-western part of the house, next to the abovementioned threshold ornamented with a cross. On one of its bigger sides (now directed to the east), there is a concave, carved, flat and wide graffito with a representation of a kind of "triphorium" with four columns connected by an arch in the middle and with triangular tops on the sides (Fig. 3). From the top of the central arch hangs a Greek cross, and under the lateral triangular roofs, there

are similar crosses. The shafts of the columns are rendered in a flat manner and devoid of any ornamentation, but their bases and capitals are clearly visible, although all of this is not enough to assign these columns to any order of architecture. Out of the three Greek crosses, the left one is almost invisible because the stone is considerably damaged there. The middle cross is damaged as well, but to a lesser extent, while the best preserved cross is the right one, whose arms seem to widen slightly at the ends. In any case, the drawing of the entire "triphorium" is simple and clumsy and seems to be a preliminary work done with a chisel (without using a drill bit). According to Joyce Reynolds, it would represent an "incised façade" that could indicate "even an ecclesiastical function for the house."<sup>9</sup> However, if this image was to be understood so literally, it could also represent a section of the interior of a basilica, across its nave and aisles. One thing is certain, namely, it is a Christian ornament, and the place of discovery of this item, like in the case of the other two reliefs with crosses, indicates only that in the 5<sup>th</sup> c., after the earthquake, House T was inhabited by Christians<sup>10</sup>, who may not have practised any cult activity there, as there is no appropriate room (a church or a chapel) in this building, let alone any liturgical equipment.

As for the interpretation of the relief architectonic representation on the limestone block, it is difficult to compare it with other images of buildings made with the

<sup>6</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, J.H. LITTLE, D.J. MATTINGLY, *Town Houses...*, 143, 149 – the impossibility of determining the chronology of House T results from the fact that so far no one has examined the pottery and the coins found there.

<sup>7</sup> E. GASPARINI, *Edilizia domestica e autorappresentazione a Tolemaide nel periodo tardoantico*, (in:) E. Jastrzębowska,

M. Niewójt (eds.), *Archeologia a Tolemaide...*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments...*, 197.

<sup>9</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments...*, 194, fig. 148.

<sup>10</sup> E. GASPARINI, *Edilizia domestica...*, 159–164.





Fig. 4. Mosaic from the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, the mid-6<sup>th</sup> c. (M. PICIRILLO, *The Mosaics...*, fig. 228).  
Ryc. 4. Mozaika z kaplicy prezbitera Jana w Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, połowa VI w.

same technique of stone carving as it has no analogies among the stone reliefs I know. By contrast, there are numerous mosaic representations, both of church façades (frequently) and of church interiors (rarely) from North Africa, Syria and Arabia, which I collected and analysed already two years ago.<sup>11</sup> One of them is a monumental “triphorium,” as it were, unconnected with any church representation, which surrounds the foundation inscription in the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat on Mount Nebo (in Jordan) from the mid-6<sup>th</sup> c. (Fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> Particularly noteworthy is also the mosaic representation of another “triphorium” from the same century, from the Eastern Basilica in Qasr el-Libya in Cyrenaica, quite near

Ptolemais (Fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> In the intercolumnar spaces, there hang simple cloths fringed on the bottom, although John Ward-Perkins identified these curtains as doors, and under them he saw steps leading to these doors behind the columns.<sup>14</sup> From the point of view of architectonic construction, it is difficult to imagine any columns standing in the middle of the stairs in the façade of the building. However, first of all, the representation of a “triphorium” from Qasr el-Libya is located under a dedicatory inscription and in the middle of an extremely interesting mosaic consisting of 50 square figural panels characterised by extremely wide-ranging subjects and extensive symbolism. The whole ornamentation refers to the diversity and abundance

<sup>11</sup> E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Graffito with “Triphorium”...*, 630–635.

<sup>12</sup> M. PICIRILLO, *Mosaïques byzantines de Jordanie, Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-Romaine de Lyon. Février – Mai 1989*, Korneuburg 1989, 244–245; idem, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman 1993, 174–175, figs. 225, 228, 230, 233.

<sup>13</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, *A New Group of Mosaics from Cyrenaica*, “Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana” XXXIV, 1958, 188–192;

S. STUCCHI, *Architettura Cirenaica...*, 399–400, fig. 403 (as “la rappresentazione di una basilica”); E. ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM, J.B. WARD-PERKINS, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches*, Monografie di Archeologia Libica XIV, Rome 1980, 59, pl. 16:2 (as “the temple or church? façade”).

<sup>14</sup> E. ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM, J.B. WARD-PERKINS, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements...*, 128.



Fig. 5. Mosaic from the Eastern Basilica in Qasr el-Libya, 6<sup>th</sup> c. (Photo E. Jastrzębowska).

Ryc. 5. Mozaika z Bazyliki Wschodniej w Qasr el-Libia, VI w.



of nature, to the achievements of the Roman civilisation, and even to everyday life. All these motifs reflect the heritage of the Antiquity and the “triphorium” itself is derived mostly from a similar architectural setting, topped with a so-called Syrian arch and surrounding imperial images, which were quite popular in this form in the Late Antiquity.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, the modest relief from Ptolemais could by no means equal rich mosaic representations in church interiors or imperial images on luxury objects. At present,

I believe that the stonemason, the author of the graffito from House T, did not follow monumental and magnificent imperial representations. Perhaps he did not even know them but saw a model for his representation among small figurines commonly used at that time in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Basin. In fact, early Byzantine metal (bronze and copper) weights dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. are ornamented with very similar images of a “triphorium,” decorated with a cross under the central arch as well.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the silver Missorium of Theodosius I from Madrid (A. EFFENBERGER, *Frühchristliche Kunst und Kultur. Von den Anfängen bis zum 7. Jahrhundert*, Leipzig 1986, figs. 30, 87) and the mosaic representation of the Palace of Theodoric in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (F.W. DEICHMANN, *Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, vol. III:

*Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna*, Wiesbaden 1995<sup>2</sup>, pl. 108).

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Dr Piotr Jaworski, of the Unit of Classical Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, for drawing my attention to these items.



Fig. 6. Drawing incised on a three ounce weight, copper alloy, 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c., British Museum, London (CH. ENTWISTLE, *Byzantine Weights...*, fig. 7).

Ryc. 6. Rysunek wyryty na odważniku trzech uncji, stop miedzi, V–VI w., British Museum, Londyn.

These weights with Greek inscriptions were probably well-known and commonly used in Ptolemais. On the weight published by Christopher Entwistle, one of many similar items, weighing three ounces and made of a copper alloy, there is an almost identical “triphorium” with four columns connected with an arch in the middle and with triangular roofs on the sides (Fig. 6).<sup>17</sup> Under the central arch, there is a Latin cross with arms widened at the ends, and in the lateral intercolumnar spaces, there are two Greek capital gamma letters signifying the number 3, the weight of a three ounce weight. Over the “triphorium” and under the middle and the lateral triangular tops of the columns, there is the following inscription: ΘΕΟΥ ΧΑΡΙΣ meaning “divine grace.”<sup>18</sup>

In my opinion, what can help understand how this ornament of a weight became an ornament of the stone block is the location of the block in House T (Fig. 2:A). Namely, it is situated immediately next to a masonry work-

shop (Fig. 2:B), which was active during the last phase of the existence of this house in its south-western part.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it seems highly likely to me that the relief with an image of a “triphorium” was a result of preliminary work of a stonemason or his occupational exercises under the tutelage of a master, so it would be a training or trial work or a sketch in masonry and not an ornamental item or one for sale. The creator of the relief modelled it on an ornament of a weight, the nearest and most convenient object, which was certainly in everyday use in the workshop, so he copied the image from the copper weight in stone, only scaling the original pattern up.

Despite such a modest reason and purpose of the creation of the relief in question, hardly connected with rich church ornamentation including similar compositions in the same period, the graffito from Ptolemais draws indirectly on the monumental decoration of church interiors, and everything, by the way, derives from models typical of

<sup>17</sup> CH. ENTWISTLE, *Byzantine Weights*, (in:) A.E. Laiou (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, Washington 2002, 613, fig. 7. Similar items are on permanent exhibition of Byzantine art in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. T. DERDA, *Inscriptions with the Formula Θεου χάρις κέρδος on Late Roman Amphorae*, “Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik” 94, 1992, 135–152.

<sup>19</sup> E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *La bottega del tagliapietre a Tolemaide*, “Archeologia Classica” 60, n.s. 10, 2009, 421–431.

the representative art of the Empire, where old images of rulers were replaced by crosses in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. Only the original model for the representation most probably got to House T in Ptolemais quite prosaically by means of the decoration of small metal weights.

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### RELIEF Z PTOLEMAIS – FASADA KOŚCIOŁA, SYMBOL RELIGIJNY CZY ĆWICZENIE KAMIENIARSKIE?

**B**lok wapienia z wyłobionym wizerunkiem trzech krzyży wewnątrz arkady w typie trifory (**Ryc. 1**) leży porzucony w ruinach rzymskiego domu mieszkalnego, tzw. Domu o Trzech Apsydach (Dom T) w Ptolemais (**Ryc. 2**). Zaś sam luksusowy Dom T z centralnym perystylem znajduje się po wschodniej stronie jednej z *cardines* i na północ od tzw. *Via Monumentalis*. Wiadomo, że w Domu T wyróżniono kilka faz użytkowania: od wczesnego, przez późne Cesarstwo, po okres bizantyjski, i że tę luksusową rezydencję miejską z I w. n.e. zniszczyło trzęsienie ziemi w 365 r., po którym została ona odbudowana. Zatem wydaje się, że to z tego ostatniego okresu pochodzi omawiany blok wapienia o wymiarach ok. 80×40×40 cm. Na jednym z jego większych boków (zwróconym obecnie ku wschodowi) znajduje się wklęsłe wyłobienie – płaskie i szerokie graffito – z wizerunkiem swoistej „trifory” z czterema kolumnami, połączonymi arkadą pośrodku, i trójkątnymi zwieńczeniami po bokach (**Ryc. 3**). Ze szczytu centralnej arkady zwisa grecki krzyż, a pod bocznymi trójkątnymi daszkami umieszczono podobne krzyże. Trzony kolumn są tylko obrysowane i pozbawione jakiegokolwiek dekoracji, ale ich bazy i kapitele są dobrze widoczne. Spośród trzech krzyży lewy jest niemal niewidoczny, bo w tym miejscu kamień ma duży ubytek. Podobnie, choć w mniejszym stopniu, zniszczony jest centralny krzyż, a najlepiej zachowany jest krzyż prawy, który wydaje się mieć lekko rozszerzone końce ramion.

Jeśli chodzi o interpretację tego reliefu, to najlepsze analogie stanowią mozaikowe przedstawienia, zarówno fasad kościołów (liczne), jak i wewnątrz kościelnych (rzadziej występujące) z Północnej Afryki, Syrii i Arabii<sup>1</sup> (**Ryc. 4, 5**). Jednak skromny relief z Ptolemais nie mógł dorównywać bogatym przedstawieniom mozaikowym we wnętrzach kościelnych. Sądzę zatem, że kamieniarz, autor graffita z Domu T, nie wzorował się na monumentalnych wizerunkach tego typu. Natknął się na wzór dla swojego przedstawienia w drobnej plastyce, będącej wówczas w codziennym użytku we wschodniej części basenu Morza Śródziemnego. Bardzo podobne rytzy „trifory”, również ozdobione krzyżem pod centralną arkadą, dekorują metalowe odważniki wczesnobizantyjskie, datowane na V–VI w. Odważniki te zaopatrzone są w inskrypcje greckie, były zapewne dobrze znane i używane w Ptolemais, np. odważnik o wadze trzech uncji, wykonany ze stopu miedzi, z wizerunkiem „trifory” z czterema kolumnami połączonymi łukiem pośrodku i trójkątnymi zwieńczeniami po bokach (**Ryc. 6**). W centralnej arkadzie znajduje się krzyż łaciński o rozszerzonych końcach ramion, a w bocznych interkolumniach – dwie duże greckie litery „gamma” oznaczające cyfrę 3, czyli wagę odważnika trzech uncji. Nad „triforą” oraz pod środkową arkadą i bocznymi trójkątnymi zwieńczeniami kolumn umieszczono inskrypcję: ΘΕΟΥ ΧΑΡΙΣ, oznaczającą „łaskę Bożą”.

<sup>1</sup> Por. E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Graffito with „Triphorium”...* (przyp. 1 na s. 23).



Blok kamienny w Domu T (**Ryc. 2:A**) znajduje się w bezpośrednim sąsiedztwie warsztatu kamieniarskiego (**Ryc. 2:B**), który działał w ostatniej fazie istnienia tego domu. Zatem wydaje mi się bardzo prawdopodobne, że relief na omawianym bloku nie stanowił obiektu przeznaczonego do celu dekoracyjnego, lecz był wynikiem pracy wstępnej kamieniarza lub jego ćwiczeń zawodowych.

Autorowi reliefu za wzór posłużyła dekoracja odważnika, przedmiotu będącego z pewnością w codziennym użyciu w warsztacie. Mimo tak skromnego wzorca i powodu wykonania omawianego reliefu, mającego niewiele wspólnego z bogatą dekoracją kościelną, w której w tym samym czasie pojawiają się podobne kompozycje, graffito z Ptolemais nawiązuje pośrednio do tego rodzaju dekoracji.